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ABSTRACT

Studies suggesting appropriate literature for children at various stages of social and intellectual development can offer only a general picture of children's changing response to literature. While smaller children appear to prefer shorter stories in simple language, for example, they readily accept the unfamiliar place names or nonsense words of nursery rhymes. As this pleasure in the occasional new word or idea suggests, children move at individual and uneven rates from the known or expected to the new. Although each child's response to the balance of strange and familiar in a book differs, the best children's authors appear to know intuitively how to mix the stimulating and the reassuring, and how to balance conservatism and innovation in language and plot. (MM)

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The Child and the Book; Exceptions and the Rule

Nicholas Tucker

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The child and the book; exceptions and the rule.

Adults who press books on children very often have little idea whether the particular title in mind is below, at,or well above any individual child's present capacities. When a mistake is made, it can sometimes be an important one. To give a child a book he or she considers as silly can be an insult quite as bad as attempting to resurrect any hated baby-talk they have now proudly grown away from. A book that is too difficult may simply confirm a child in the belief that literature is a lost cause, since children read for pleasure rather than to improve themselves, and books that make them feel inadequate can provoke resentment as well as boredom. No wonder, therefore, that so many parents as well as teachers often ask for specific advice on this score, given they seldom get more from the publishers than a ' suggested reading age' - if that - on a book's inside flap to guide them and this often of a suspiciously elastic nature.("Suitable for children between 8-14.")

It was largely because of this situation that I eventually decided to write my own study, The child and the book; a literary and psychological exploration.(Cambridge University Press, 1981; paper-back edition, 1983) In this, I bracketed what was known about children's intellectual and social development at various ages along with the type of literature that would seem most appropriate at any particular time. The fiction I chose to illustrate this last point was not always from great literary masterpieces for children but more from those perennial best-sellers that really did seem to offer something which, at certain stages, a lot of children wanted. Now that my book has been published, there is nothing in it I would radically wish to revise. And yet, I am nagged by the feeling that the developmental norms I described in children, and their corollary in children's fiction, still do not explain anything like the whole of a child's responses to any book, nor indeed the whole of any book's appeal to a particular child.

To give an example: smaller children, I pointed out, prefer stories that are not too long told in a language they can understand. I would still defend this view, concentration among the young is limited, and incomprehensible language is a bore for everyone. Yet how does this explain the tendency of truly favourite

authors like Beatrix Potter to get away, every now and again, with a fine-sounding word in her stories quite unknown to children? Or the way that nursery rhymes, equally successful with the young, use make-up language(Humpty-dumpty), archaisms (Curds and whey) remote place-names(Three wise men of Gotham) and ancient counting systems(Eena, meena, mina,mo). None of this will be already familiar to children, yet it soon becomes so after a few hearings. Does this contradict my previously stated, surely quite unexceptionable developmental norm, that children prefer language they can easily understand, both in books and with people?

The answer, of course, lies in the definition of a norm, and this perhaps is something I could originally have brought out more strongly. As it is, any norm only describes what generally happens; there will always be room for exceptions. In the case of child development, such exceptions take on extreme importance. Childhood, by definition, is never static; within it, children constantly edge forward on some fronts while keeping others relatively unchanged. Seen like this, children's preference for the odd exotic word or phrase among a mass of better-known ones becomes more explicable. While prose that is made up entirely of exciting, unknown words would be of little use to them, prose that always sticks determinedly to words they know well can fail to stimulate that other part of a child anxious for something new.

In fact, the more I look at books for children, the more I am struck by the way that the best authors tend to get this delicate equation between conservatism and innovation more or less right, not just for language but where other reading responses are concerned. Take the whole issue of plot predictability. Smaller children tend to get puzzled by stories with complex plots; accordingly, favourite tales for this stage often revolve around simple, stereotyped situations, heavily repetitive but comforting to younger readers in their predictable symmetry. In fairy stories, the 'rule of three' helps accustom readers to the fact that it will generally be three wishes, three tasks or three riddles in such stories, and that the third will always be the most important. Where non-fairy, more domestic

tales for this age are concerned, children will soon get to know other patterns true from story to story: how precious lost objects generally turn up by the last page; how naughty, rebellious children are usually put right by events, or how longed-for wishes are most often realised, at least in some form. Armed with this type of knowledge, even quite young readers can have a good go at answering rhetorical questions of the "And who do you think was there?" type that crop up so regularly towards the end of such tales, and in classroom can sometimes be heard chanting the 'right'answer in conert with the triumphant tones of their reader-teacher.

So far, so good; children after all are newcomers to everything, literary or otherwise, and it will take practice and possibly regular repetition of particular favourite stories before they feel thoroughly at home with the pretty well invariable forms of early fiction for their age group. Yet at the same time, the same children can occasionally relish stories that break such conventions. Children clearly like tall stories, for example, and in the case of a popular author like Dr Seuss they are quite happy to take on his weird monsters and strange culinary inventions such as goose-moose burgers, such a contrast to the cups of tea dispensed by Mrs Tiggywinkle in the more ordered world of Beatrix Potter. Where fairy stories are concerned, selections from the Arabian Nights have always been well liked, even though this means that the Western-style get up and go philosophy already familiar to children from European fairy tales is largely replaced by something much closer to Eastern fatalism. But lack of a happy ending each time, plus the feeling of personal helplessness at the whim of an inscrutable universe, does not necessarily seem to put children off, however different the tone is here to the breezy optimism found in Joseph Jacobs English Fairy Tales or the dogged belief in personal success in tales retold by the brothers Grimm.

Even so, children still do not endlessly enjoy topsy-turvey humour or any other systematic distortion of more predictable expectations in fiction. They will continue to have to learn the norms before they appreciate the ab-norms, and

and too much iconoclasm in any art can eventually lead to shapeless incoherence. But the fact remains: children do seem to enjoy variation as well as theme, as in their reactions to character descriptions in fiction. On the whole, smaller children do not normally respond well to complex literary characters, given that it is much easier for them - and often for us as well - to think in terms of extremes rather than in more indeterminate shades. When they get older, though, it does become easier for them to accept 'role-drift' in characterisation, where the not so good can occasionally show redeeming features half way through, while the heroic may sometimes reveal an unexpected Achilles Heel, if not two feet of clay. The classic example of more complex characterisation of this type in children's fiction occurs in Treasure Island, where Long John Silver is only half a villain, the potentially tragic figure of Ben Gunn turns rapidly into a comedian(well brought out by Spike Milligan when he acted the part) and the Squire and the Doctor reveal themselves as a little too greedy for their or other people's own good.

Infants cannot usually take on such subtleties, and Treasure Island has accordingly never been a favourite story among younger readers. Yet once again, it is quite wrong to insist that infants therefore only like characters who never change, wear their hearts on their sleeves, and can always easily be labelled. No less an authority than Bruno Bettelheim, for example, suggested in The Uses of Enchantment that one reason for fairy tale popularity with infants was precisely the way that main characters are presented as either good or bad and stay that way through to the end. A moment's thought would surely reveal a more complex picture. In Beauty and the Beast, Beauty grows in understanding while the Beast develops from the horrific to the pitiable. In King Thrushbeard, the haughty young bride has to make a similar personal journey from pride to humility. These are not stock, absolute characters, yet infants seem to like them well enough, just as they can also enjoy more rounded, realistic fictional portraits of children their own age. In Dorothy Edwards' stories about My naughty little sister,, for example, the young lady mentioned in the title has as her best friend a little boy always referred to

to as 'Bad Harry.' But it would be inaccurate to imagine that such pejorative adjectives really described anything truly 'bad' to a young audience. Harry and his little girl friend are certainly mischievous,yet they usually try to make it all up by the end and can almost always be won round by superior adult guilt-producing cunning. What emerges from these stories, therefore, is nothing like the continuously disruptive behaviour of Enid Blyton's gollywog characters, or the mayhem caused by the young tear-aways found in the Beano and Dandy comics. In contrast, the naughty little sister and Bad Harry are subtle, many-sided characters, who do not fit easily into any particular moral pigeon-hole, yet they remain very popular with their young readers.

So while smaller children are happy to learn and recognise various cliches of early fiction, they also seem to welcome deviations from such norms from time to time. While wild animals usually appear as fearsome objects in fairy tales, for example, the same stories - or modern picture books - will sometimes offer a contrasting view featuring various happy lions, pacffic bulls or nurturant wolves, with children quite able to accept such contradictory images from one story to another. While young readers generally like justice to be seen to be done where 'bad' characters step seriously out of moral line, and American psychologist, E.Turiel, also claims that the same children are willing to discuss more complex moral issues arising from a story, and will not always foreclose on any simple concept of reciprocal justice for the wrong-doer, come what may. Looking at an older age-group, readers here often enjoy stories rich in 'cognitive conceit' - David Elkind's phrase for the common early adolescent fantasy that most of them are really far brighter than those maddening, out of touch adults in their lives who always think they know best. While this fantasy is reflected in legions of stories of the Emil and the detectives type, featuring pubescent gangs going it alone, there are also other stories from E.Nesbit onwards, revolving around the failure of children to foresee just those snags in certain adventures that adults usually understand so much better.

All this is not to suggest that most children are constantly ready for

a consistently more complex view in their fiction. Adult masterpieces that attempt a really fully rounded description of childhood, as in Henry James What Maisie knew or L.P.Hartley's The Shrimp and the Anemone will always be too hard for younger readers. But while it is valuable to know the type of fictional norms children generally do find it easiest to understand at various ages, we should also remember that another part of them may always want to advance such norms into something a little more complex, not all at once, but every now and again while other familiar fictional attitudes remain constant. An analogy here would be those Fruit Machines where punters can 'hold' a line of three symbols intact while remaining free to spin the fourth. In the case of reading, children may sometimes, in the course of an otherwise conventional, predictable story, be led to consider that certain characters or attidues even so are really a little more complex than they sometimes have appeared ~~in-the-same-novel~~ so far.

There are, of course, players of fruit machines who dislike an element of choice, just as there are child readers content to stick with a writer like Enid Blyton who never advances any line of thought away from current childish cliches at all. On the other hand, there are also gamblers who find all Fruit Machines boring and limited; the analogy here could be those precocious child readers who quickly tire of most children's fiction, even those books which do offer an occasionally more sophisticated view of some human affairs. Here, such readers generally cannot wait to get on to the complexities of adult fiction, although they may relish meanwhile some of the more difficult writers for children such as Alan Garner, William Mayne and Leon Garfield.

If any aspiring children's writer has ever been kind enough to refer to my The Child and the Book for some guidance as to where exactly they should pitch the material for any projected book, I would tell them the following cautinary story. In 1971 the great Swiss psychologist, Jean Piaget, was asked to help with a book for children by a French artist and author, Etienne Delessert. In particular, Delessert wanted Piaget - who at that time knew more about

developmental psychology than anyone else in the world - to tell him how infants aged 5-6 understood and interpreted various natural phemonena such as the sun, the moon, clouds, winds and so on. Piaget was ready to oblige, and with the help of a collaborator infants of this age were duly questioned, with their answers woven lossely into a text reflecting their most typical ideas in the course of a short, simple story, entitled Comment la souris recoit une pierre dur la tete et decouvre le monde(How the mouse was hit on the head by a stone and so discovered the world, translated in English for an American publisher, but so far unpublished in the U.K.)

It would be nice to say that the book was a success, given all this prior preparation, Its illustrations are certainly charming, cincluding a collage on the last page consisting of some of the new things the mouse was going to discover in her future travels which includes a charming portrait of Piaget himself. The text, however, is woefully pedestrian, composed chiefly of different explanations as to how exactly this or that originated and what was its present function now. The reasoning displayed by the mouse may well follow how infants think about the same things, but when such exact echoes of childish thought are reproduced in toto and without development, the end result can seem very tedious, both for child and for adult readers.

So while it is essential for an author to know or else feel for a child's typical psychological outlook at any one time, only instinct can tell him or her when a text should go along with an audience and when it should strike out in what may look like a relatively new direction. That is why so many really good books for children are mixtures of the stimulating and the reassuring; that is why they can only be analysed in terms of developmental norms up to a point. What happens between themand their young readers after that, and whether the way the story pushes forward is always the particular way any one child may be ready for at that moment, is something that can only be tackled, if at all, on an individual basis. To that extent, global surveys of the type I attempted in my

book only take us so far when it comes to mediating interactions between children and their favourite literature, thogugh I would still argue that even this fairly short journey in understanding is worthwhile. At least, after having completed it, we should know how far we have come as well as how very far we still have to go before reaching anything like full understanding of what happens when one child reads one book.

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